

Message Text

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ACTION NEA-10

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SUBJECT: GOVERNMENT AND PRESS CLASH OVER NEW CENSORSHIP PROPOSALS

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SUMMARY: CABINET JANUARY 18 ADOPTED AN ORDER AIMED AT SEALING LEAKS BY EXTENDING CENSORSHIP TO INCLUDE SENSITIVE DOCUMENTS EXCHANGED BETWEEN ISRAEL AND FOREIGN GOVERNMENT AS WELL AS SECRET INFORMATION CONCERNING VISITS TO AND VISITORS FROM OTHER COUNTRIES REGARDLESS OF WHETHER THEY HAVE DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH ISRAEL. REACTION FROM JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATIONS AND EDITORIAL COMMENTARY HAVE BEEN UNIVERSALLY NEGATIVE, CHARGING THAT PROPOSED ORDER UNDERMINES FREEDOM OF THE PRESS, FAILS TO GET AT ROOT OF PROBLEM AND IS UNLIKELY TO END ENTRENCHED HABIT OF LEAKS. ISSUE NOW GOES TO KNESSET FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENSE COMMITTEE WHERE HEATED DEBATE IS EXPECTED. END SUMMARY.

1. ON JANUARY 18, UPON RECOMMENDATION OF PRIME MINISTER RABIN AND JUSTICE MINISTER ZADOK, CABINET ADOPTED FOLLOWING ORDER DEALING WITH EXTENSION OF CENSORSHIP
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TO CERTAIN POLITICAL TOPICS.

2. BEGIN TEXT: THE FOLLOWING SHALL BE SECRET MATTERS, PROVIDED THEIR PUBLICATION HAS NOT BEEN PERMITTED BY THE PRIME MINISTER OR ON HIS BEHALF OR BY THE FOREIGN MINISTER OR ON HIS BEHALF:

A. INFORMATION OF THE EXISTENCE OR CONTENTS OF A DOCUMENT CONCERNING ISRAEL'S FOREIGN RELATIONS WHICH IS CLASSIFIED AS "MOST SECRET" OR BEARS A CLASSIFICATION OF SIMILAR SIGNIFICANCE, BEING AN ISRAELI DOCUMENT INTENDED FOR THE REPRESENTATIVE OF A FOREIGN STATE OR A DOCUMENT OF A FOREIGN STATE INTENDED FOR A REPRESENTATIVE OF ISRAEL.

B. INFORMATION CONCERNING THE VISIT OF A REPRESENTATIVE OF ISRAEL TO A FOREIGN STATE OR OF THE REPRESENTATIVE OF A FOREIGN STATE TO ISRAEL, OR CONCERNING A MEETING BETWEEN A REPRESENTATIVE OF ISRAEL AND A REPRESENTATIVE OF A FOREIGN STATE-- (IN CASES) WHERE ISRAEL DOES NOT MAINTAIN DIPLOMATIC RELATIONS WITH SAID FOREIGN STATE, AND THE VISIT OR MEETING NOT HAVING BEEN OFFICIALLY PUBLISHED IN ISRAEL.

END TEXT. FURTHER ACTION RESTS WITH THE KNESSET FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENSE COMMITTEE WHERE HEATED DEBATE IS EXPECTED.

2. REACTION OF DOMESTIC AND FOREIGN JOURNALISTS WAS IMMEDIATE AND VEHEMENT IN OPPOSITION TO THE ORDER. JERUSALEM POST REPORTED JANUARY 19 THAT..."THE PRESIDUM OF THE EDITORS COMMITTEE, EXPRESSED ITS REGRET AT THE NEW REGULATIONS AND PLEDGED TO FIGHT THEM AT THE FOREIGN AFFAIRS AND DEFENSE COMMITTEE. THE EDITORS SAID THEY HAD SENT A DELEGATION TO DISCUSS THE QUESTION WITH PREMIER RABIN AND MR. ZADOK AND HAD ARGUED THAT THIS INCIPIENT FORM OF POLITICAL CENSORSHIP WOULD HAVE GRAVE REPERCUSSIONS FOR ISRAEL, AT HOME AND ABROAD, WHILE ITS POTENTIAL ADVANTAGES WOULD BE, AT BEST, DUBIOUS. THE DELEGATION HAD STRESSED THAT THE SUREST WAY FOR THE GOVERNMENT TO CURB LEAKS WAS TO 'PLUG THEM AT THE SOURCE'. IF THIS WERE NOT DONE, THE EDITORS ARGUED, STATE SECRETS WOULD STILL DRIBBLE OUT, THROUGH THE FOREIGN NEWS MEDIA.

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3. "THE JOURNALISTS ASSOCIATION SAID ITS EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE UNANIMOUSLY CONDEMNED THE GOVERNMENT'S INTENDED MOVE AS A BLOW TO PRESS FREEDOM.

4. "THE FOREIGN PRESS ASSOCIATION PROTESTED 'IN THE STRONGEST POSSIBLE TERMS.' IT WARNED THAT 'THIS VIOLATION OF THE FREEDOM OF THE PRESS IS A SERIOUS THREAT TO

ISRAEL'S DEMOCRATIC REPUTATION.

5. "PROF. NATAN ROTENSTREICH THE CHAIRMAN OF THE PRESS COUNCIL, ALSO ATTACKED THE NEW REGULATIONS. IN A TELEVISION INTERVIEW HE SAID POLITICAL CENSORSHIP WOULD DO THE COUNTRY MORE HARM THAN LEAKS COULD..."

6. EDITORIAL COMMENTARY IN HEBREW PRESS ECHOED THESE SENTIMENTS. EDITORIALISTS CHARGE THAT EXTENSIVE LEAKS RESULT FROM GOVERNMENT INABILITY TO ENFORCE DISCIPLINE AMONG CABINET MEMBERS AND NOT FROM PRESS IRRESPONSIBILITY. DAVAR PREDICTS THAT THE MEASURE WILL BE INEFFECTIVE SINCE LEAKED INFORMATION WILL CONTINUE TO BE PUBLISHED IN THE NON-ISRAELI PRESS. AL HAMISHMAR LAMENTS "...THE DAMAGE WILL BE DONE TO ISRAEL'S IMAGE AS A DEMOCRATIC COUNTRY... ANY COUNTRY WHERE THERE IS POLITICAL CENSORSHIP--WHETHER LIMITED OR EXTENSIVE--FALLS WITHIN A CATEGORY OF REGIMES FROM WHICH ISRAEL IS FAR REMOVED BY NATURE AND HISTORY.". MAARIV WRITES: "THERE WAS ONE PRECIOUS ASSET IN THIS COUNTRY OF WHICH WE WERE PROUD EVEN IN THE DARKEST DAYS OF SELF-CRITICISM AND PAINFUL APPRAISAL--FREEDOM TO KNOW AND INFORM, THE RIGHT TO ARGUE AND DISAGREE ON THE BASIS OF KNOWLEDGE OF THE FACTS, THE POSSIBILITY OF CRITICIZING THE GOVERNMENT'S ACTIONS AND POLICY WITHOUT FEAR...THE GOVERNMENT DECISION IS INCONSISTENT WITH THE PRINCIPLE OF FREEDOM OF THE PRESS. IF THE GOVERNMENT WANTS TO KEEP ITS SECRETS, IT MUST BIND ITSELF TO SECRECY, NOT THE NEWSPAPERS."

7. COMMENT: RABIN AND ZADOK HAVE OPENED PANDORA'S BOX. BY TRYING TO RESOLVE PROBLEM OF LEAKS, THEY HAVE RAISED UGLY ISSUE OF CENSORSHIP. OUTCOME IS UNPREDICTABLE, BUT EVEN AT THIS STAGE IT SEEMS LIMITED OFFICIAL USE

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UNLIKELY LEAKS CAN BE PLUGGED IN THIS FASHION.
DUNNIGAN

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Message Attributes

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